

Children's Need for Physical Activity: Fact Sheet

- Children in the United States today are less fit than they were a generation ago. Many are showing early signs of cardiovascular risk factors such as physical inactivity, excess weight, higher blood cholesterol and cigarette smoking.
- Inactive children, when compared with active children, weigh more, have higher blood pressure and lower levels of heart-protective high-density lipoproteins (HDL cholesterol).
- Even though heart attack and stroke are rare in children, evidence shows that the process leading to those conditions begins in childhood.
- The 2005 Youth Risk Factor Surveillance Study indicates that 9.6 percent of youth don't engage in moderate or vigorous physical activity.
- A fitness testing program sponsored by the Chrysler Fund Amateur Athletic Union, which tracks fitness among 9.7 million people between ages 6–17, shows that children are getting slower in endurance running and weaker.
- The National Health and Nutrition Examination Study (NHANES, 1999–2004) found that the prevalence of overweight American adolescents ages 12–19 was 17.9 percent for males and 16.0 percent for females. There was an increase of nearly 179 percent from 1971 to 2004.
- About 10 percent of adolescents ages 12–19 have total cholesterol levels exceeding 200 mg/dL.
- An estimated 59 percent of American children under ages 4–11 are exposed to secondhand smoke in the home. An estimated 1,500 American young people become smokers every day.
- 37.2 percent of high school students spend three or more hours a day watching TV.
- Inactive children are more likely to become inactive adults.
- Healthy lifestyle training should start in childhood to promote improved cardiovascular health in adult life. The following good health practices should be promoted among children:
 - regular physical activity
 - a low-saturated-fat, low-cholesterol diet after age 2
 - smoking prevention
 - appropriate weight for height
 - regular pediatric medical checkups

Top Ten Ways to Help Children Develop Healthy Habits

1. Be a positive role model. If you're practicing healthy habits, it's a lot easier to convince children to do the same.
2. Get the whole family active. Plan times for everyone to get moving together. Take walks, ride bikes, go swimming, garden or just play hide-and-seek outside. Everyone will benefit from the exercise and the time together.
3. Limit TV, video game and computer time. These habits lead to a sedentary lifestyle and excessive snacking, which increase risks for obesity and cardiovascular disease.
4. Encourage physical activities that children really enjoy. Every child is unique. Let children experiment with different activities until each finds something that he or she really loves doing. They'll stick with it longer if they love it.
5. Be supportive. Focus on the positive instead of the negative. Everyone likes to be praised for a job well done. Celebrate successes and help children and teens develop a good self-image.
6. Set specific goals and limits, such as one hour of physical activity a day or two desserts per week other than fruit. When goals are too abstract or limits too restrictive, the chance for success decreases.
7. Don't reward children with food. Candy and snacks as a reward encourage bad habits. Find other ways to celebrate good behavior.
8. Make dinnertime a family time. When everyone sits down together to eat, there's less chance of children eating the wrong foods or snacking too much. Get the kids involved in cooking and planning meals. Everyone develops good eating habits together and the quality time with the family will be an added bonus.
9. Make a game of reading food labels. The whole family will learn what's good for their health and be more conscious of what they eat. It's a habit that helps change behavior for a lifetime.
10. Stay involved. Be an advocate for healthier children. Insist on good food choices at school. Make sure your children's healthcare providers are monitoring cardiovascular indicators like BMI, blood pressure and



cholesterol. Contact public officials on matters of the heart. Make your voice heard